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Nadaby Carmen Laforet
(Harvill Secker, £16.99)

★★★★★

Carmen Laforet's debut novel *Nada*, first published in 1945, is considered a modern classic in her native Spain. Orphaned 18-year-

old Andrea arrives in civil war-ravaged Barcelona to stay with relatives while she studies at university. The suffocating ruin of her grandmother's apartment is reflected in the psychological ruin of its occupants: her senile granny; nihilistic and predatory uncle Román; violently abusive uncle Juan; stiflingly repressed, neurotic aunt Angustias; Juan's childlike, wilful wife Gloria; and the unbiddable maid Antonia. As Andrea's dreams are slowly crushed by this oppressive environment (and a devastating lack of food), she finds comfort in a friendship with Ena, one of the gilded set at university – until Ena and Román's mysterious relationship begins to torment her. Edith Grossman's sensitive translation does full justice to this Gothic tale of poverty, despair and repression. Grand themes haunt the shadowy corners of this rites-of-passage tale: *Nada* explores the miserable fates of Spanish women at the time and offers a biting political commentary on Franco's fascist Spain. But above all, this is

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an engrossing, beautifully observed, often hallucinatory book that deserves its exalted status.

*Siobhan Murphy***The Peacock Throne**by Sujit Saraf
(Sceptre, £12.99)

★★★★☆



The *Peacock Throne* is a dark, intricately composed farce of epic proportions. Set in Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi's bustling main street, it's structured around four real-life milestones in India's recent history – beginning with the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 – plus one fictional one. It features a cast of avaricious, atavistic characters including shop-owners, prostitutes, would-be politicians and do-gooders, each struggling to grab an advantage in a teeming Third World environment where even scraps and leftovers are bitterly contested. The only character untainted by corruption is kindly, ineffectual Gopal Pandey, whose lack of ambition is the foil that reveals the full corrosive impact of everyone else's self-seeking. It's an unrelentingly pessimistic view of human nature but the compelling narrative drive is shot

through with a sly vein of humour that keeps you turning the pages.

*Tina Jackson***Fireproof**by Raj Kamal Jha
(Picador £12.99)

★★★★☆



Lauded as a new voice for contemporary Indian writers following novels *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You Are Afraid Of Heights*, Raj Kamal Jha's talents feel over-stretched in his ambitious third novel. Set in the city of Ahmedabad amid the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots of February 2002, Jay, the father of a deformed newborn, becomes embroiled in the world of the living dead where the murdered, raped and tortured are given a voice usually denied them. But from this compelling opening, the author's motives become confused. Twisted, vengeful crimes are met without reproach, while political and social commentary is avoided, leaving the harrowing tales with little sense of purpose. If it's shock value Jha is after, violence indeed pervades. However, graphic portrayals of gruesome acts are repeated so often that the effect is muted. Jay's character harps on about mundane detail rather than guiding feeling or heightening suspense, which, coupled with the cold, authorial voice, leaves little to react to.

Zena Alkayat